

# The New Guinness Book of Records: A Vocabulary Resource

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*By Maria del Carmen Mendez-Garcia and Miguel Rodriguez Ramos*

When choosing textbooks that best suit our teaching situations, we find that the array offered by the different publishing houses proves limited. Choosing enriching materials or non-textbook materials can be time-consuming because almost everything in English—from novels to computer games—can be adapted for use in the classroom. In this article we will discuss The Guinness Book of Records, which offers classroom teachers of English as a foreign language a unique source of pedagogic possibilities.

## **The Pedagogic Nature of *The New Guinness Book of Records***

The inclusion of authentic materials in the classroom is one of the most important tenets in the teaching of EFL. Nevertheless, most teachers are overwhelmed by the difficulty of using materials that are not intended for the classroom. Materials may have complex lexical items or grammatical constructions, and the length of the passages may be excessive and time-consuming. Also, students may not be acquainted with the topics.

The New Guinness Book of Records (Matthews 1994) is a feasible alternative. As a publication written primarily in English and for English-speaking readers, its value as authentic material is beyond question. In addition, the book consists of very short passages in which the difficulty of lexical items and grammatical construction is minimal, thereby reducing the amount of time teachers need for preparation and use. The Guinness Book of Records is well known by our students and its popularity is continuously enhanced by references from the mass media.

The special nature of this book accounts for its highly motivational value in the classroom. Students usually associate this type of material with entertainment and do not necessarily think of it as a didactic tool. The book also has an attractive layout with eye-appealing pages that show pictures accompanied by explanations. Since most of the pictures are not self-explanatory, students must refer to the text. Furthermore, students are curious about the book and even the most reluctant students—as we have experienced—are eager to browse through it to discover the most fascinating records. Because of its bizarre and unique contents, a large number of students want to take the book home for a day if the teacher allows it to be borrowed. Regardless of the degree of difficulty, students experience the feeling of accomplishment when they can read and understand the information from a genuine and authentic book in English.

Learning new information and having contact with the English language should not end with English lessons. A wide range of follow-up activities can be designed by using the book. The Guinness Book of Records is an excellent source of general knowledge that can easily be linked with most cross-curricular areas. Certainly, the most important curricular areas are represented, and this undoubtedly favours the global education of students, which is the spirit of the Spanish Reform at the secondary education level in Spain.

## *The New Guinness Book of Records and the ELT curriculum*

Countless new proposals concerning the didactic excellence of particular songs, films, magazines, books, and so forth, are publicized every year. However, for a given tool to be useful, it is essential that teachers familiarize themselves with its true potential as well as the difficulties inherent in using it. The purpose of this article is to discuss the use of the book to promote language skills, taking into consideration some of the teaching possibilities as well as the drawbacks of The Guinness Book of Records.

Although most teachers would initially associate the concept of records with the teaching of such grammatical structures as comparatives and superlatives, that view may be restrictive. Indeed, the very nature of the book favours its exploitation from a wider perspective. This article is largely devoted to the teaching of vocabulary but does not exclude such topics as grammar, integration of skills, and culture.

## **Teaching Vocabulary**

### *Criteria for selection*

Vocabulary is an essential element in learning a foreign or second language, but vocabulary cannot be taught or learnt in complete isolation from the rest of the linguistic components, namely grammar, phonetics and phonology, and notions and functions. Authors have proposed diverse criteria to help textbook writers and teachers make valid decisions on the right vocabulary items to teach at every educational level.

Gairns and Redman (1986:57–63) have proposed the following criteria:

**Frequency:** The most frequently used words should be taught first. McCarthy (1990:69–70) adds a further factor clearly related to frequency range. He suggests that useful frequently-used words should appear in a wide variety of texts.

**Students' needs and levels:** The vocabulary should be appropriate to the students' level and respond to the students' needs. For example, priority vocabulary for English as a subject in the curriculum might be different from that for English for specific purposes.

**Cultural factors:** The learners' background is to be considered, since people from different countries may need different words to express their everyday life in the second language. For example, the word bullfighting may be relevant to a Spaniard, but not to a Chinese student.

**Expediency:** The classroom is a world by itself and requires specific types of vocabulary such as grammatical terminology and activity instructions.

Harmer (1991:154–156) adds to the discussion by pointing out the following criteria:

**Concretion vs. abstraction:** Concrete words should be taught at lower levels, whereas abstract terms should be taught at higher levels. This criterion is clearly linked to the cognitive development of the student and reflects the process of learning words in the mother tongue.

**Coverage:** General words should be taught before more specific terms.

**Rapport:** Either for reasons of spelling and pronunciation or cognates in the native language, some words are easier to teach and learn than others. The student's personal involvement with the word is another aid to learning. This involvement is called rapport and is a major motivator for vocabulary learning. The more related a word is to the student, the sooner it should be taught. However, it is extremely difficult to predict which words will "touch" our students because every learner has different personal experiences.

## Using *The New Guinness Book of Records* for Content

Thanks to the work of applied linguists and text developers, the application of the criteria previously considered in foreign language teaching has resulted in the establishment of relatively fixed content designed to be taught at different levels of instruction. Indeed, the vocabulary items included in almost every single textbook at the secondary education level in Spain are centered around such common topics as people, clothes, food, housing, travel, animals, places, learning, mass media, the environment, leisure, geography, occupations, transportation, work, money, education, technology, and sports.

As we can see in the chart below, there is a close relationship between textbooks and The Guinness Book of Records, as both the vocabulary items and topics are similar. In fact, The Guinness Book of Records surpasses the possibilities of textbooks and becomes a perfect complement because it discusses topics similar to those of many textbooks and has the undeniable advantage of being authentic material. This chart shows that regardless of the subject, there is almost always a parallel category in The Guinness Book of Records.

## Techniques in Presenting Vocabulary

Using a wide range of techniques brings variety to the classroom and helps the students remain alert. Used correctly, the following techniques favour the long-term retention of newly-learned vocabulary. Following Gairns and Redman's (1986:73–76) classification, presentation techniques are divided into two groups: visual and verbal.

### *Visual techniques*

**Realia:** Using a variety of real objects is one of the most efficient ways of teaching and learning vocabulary.

**Pictures:** The main advantage of pictures is that they are able to illustrate very large objects which are not easily brought into the classroom.

**Mime and gesture:** This is an extremely effective way of introducing a new word since it resembles the Total Physical Response, which clearly promotes the understanding and meaningful retention of new vocabulary items.

### *Verbal Techniques*

**Definitions and illustrative sentences:** The introduction of a word in English through the use of other words in the same language offers the advantage of contextualization. In addition, example sentences complement the definition because they show how the new word is used.

**Synonyms and antonyms:** Synonyms and antonyms are especially important in building new vocabulary because learners are able to use known vocabulary.

**Scales:** This technique is the presentation of related words in scales that include the combination of both verbal and visual techniques; for example, in the term 32° Celsius, the degree sign is the visual.

**Explanations:** This technique explains the meaning and the use of a given foreign word in the foreign language itself.

**Translations:** Although many linguists state that translation is not a good presentation technique, it is only considered dangerous for students if it becomes the only presentation technique. However, the major drawback may be when L2 words are introduced in lists.

## Sample Activities

The Guinness Book of Records favours presenting vocabulary through the use of pictures, charts, graphs, maps, diagrams, and so forth. The book has an excellent selection of shocking and highly appealing photographs that can be used by themselves or with the written text that accompanies them, thus facilitating the combination of both visual and verbal techniques.

It is worth emphasizing that the book itself mainly presents a record and its explanation. Thus, teachers can easily provide students with real instances of definition and example sentences or explanations taken from an authentic book. Let us consider the following example taken from page 21 in The Guinness Book of Records.

*THE TALLEST GEYSER - Waimangu. Imagine a fountain of boiling water higher than the Empire State Building, and you can picture the tallest geyser on record. A geyser is a spouting hot spring which discharges water and steam. The greatest height to which a geyser has ever erupted is 460m or 1500 feet, in the case of Waimangu, near Rotorua in New Zealand, at the beginning of the 20th century.*

Because this passage concentrates on extremes such as longest or shortest and on different degrees within a scale, it encourages the use of verbal techniques such as synonyms, antonyms, and scales.

We would like to note that The Guinness Book of Records provides the student with an excellent chance to interact with words through the use of discovery techniques. Guessing from context is an excellent teaching tool as the vocabulary can be applicable to any passage or excerpt within the book. Moreover, if connected to a visual technique, the results can be even more successful for students.

## Conclusion

We would like to summarize the main points of this article by highlighting a number of recurrent features. First we stress the flexible nature of The Guinness Book of Records for classroom practice. This flexibility can be understood in relation to different aspects of teaching such as level of proficiency, teaching and learning styles, materials in use, and time and length of implementation. All these factors combine to favour the introduction of activities based on or related to The Guinness Book of Records at any point of the lesson.

At the same time, the text of the book, together with its photographs, charts, and other graphical information, contributes to making it easier for the students to move freely through the different passages. As far as teachers are concerned, this crystal-clear layout saves them much time when they have to prepare the different activities.

Perhaps the most attractive feature of The Guinness Book of Records is its enjoyable and gamelike nature. The fact that so few people have ever considered using this book for ordinary classroom activities indicates a certain lack of awareness of its possibilities. To put it in a nutshell, the feasibility of adaptation and implementation together with the highly motivational aspects embodied in The Guinness Book of Records makes of it an excellent tool to use in the introduction of authentic material into the EFL classroom.

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### Exercises

<b>hunt the misfits</b>	
The activity Hunt the Misfits is based on a combination of both visual and verbal techniques. We have followed one of Morgan and Rinvolucris (1986) patterns for the explanation of the task, but the selection of the image and texts should come from <i>The New Guinness Book of Records</i> . Once new words are selected and presented, teachers can explain the activity in greater detail.	
LEVEL	Intermediate to Advanced
TIME	15-20 minutes
PREPARATION	Choose a short passage that you think will be easy for your students. Change some of the words so that it no longer makes sense. In class you will need copies of the original passage and the changed one.
IN CLASS	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Give each of the students a copy of the changed text and ask them to read it. Don't tell them what you have done to the text- let them discover it. Eventually one or more of the students will point out that there is something wrong. Then you ask them to make corrections.</li> <li>2. When they have corrected as much as they can, ask them to check each others work.</li> <li>3. Give out the original passage.</li> </ol>
FOLLOW-UP	In a later class: When the students have done two or three editing exercises like the one above, give them an original text and invite them to change it. Students take even more pleasure in constructing texts than in correcting them.

<b>vocabulary network</b>	
Vocabulary Network is a fairly common activity which consists of a series of related items of vocabulary with a certain degree of semantic affinity. The graphical display or arrangement of the different words reflects their relationship in terms of categorisation from general headings to specific items contained under them (e.g., "transportation," <i>The New Guinness Book of Records</i> , pp. 105-32).	
LEVEL	Intermediate to Advanced
TIME	15-20 minutes
PREPARATION	Read the selection you have chosen carefully. Your

	selection will become the main heading. Select three or four subsections (second level of grouping). Afterwards, decide on the particular vocabulary items fitting each category. Finally, make a chart with both heading and subheadings, leaving blanks for the rest of the items.
IN CLASS	Let the students scan through the section of The Guinness Book of Records you have been working on. Give them a copy of the chart previously designed or draw it on the blackboard. State that the purpose of the task is to fill up the chart with the words fitting each category by scanning through a particular section.

### further activities

The following are a few more practical examples of activities which are easy to implement and can serve as the stepping stones for those teachers who are not acquainted with The Guinness Book of Records. These activities are intended for mixed-ability classes working individually, in pairs, or in small groups. They can be used as a time-filling activities.

#### Activity 1

<b>Casual Browsing:</b>	This practice is for individual students, pairs, or small groups.
LEVEL	Elementary to Advanced
TIME	10–15 minutes
PREPARATION	It is important for the teacher to do some browsing in advance to check and anticipate most of the difficulties that the Students are bound to meet. Pay special attention to exceedingly complex grammatical constructions.
IN CLASS	Let the students read through <i>The Guinness Book of Records</i> or through a given section. Ask them to write down difficult words and to arrange them into two or three categories: totally unknown words, unknown words which remind them of known words, and easily inferable words. As an option you can also ask them to select one of the entries and to tell the rest of the class about it in their own words.

#### Activity 2

Another browsing activity is designed to let students search by topic with stated objectives, but

with examples according to specific topics.

<b>Travel:</b>	<b>Browse the section Transport (pp. 105–132).</b>
Hints:	Find out about transatlantic commuters and the fastest vehicles.
<b>People:</b>	<b>Browse the section Human Achievements (pp. 203–218).</b>
Hints:	Find out about “the world champion ‘best man’ with his 891 wedding ceremonies.”
<b>Money:</b>	<b>Browse the section Business World (pp. 161–174)</b>
Hints:	Find out about the youngest millionaire ever.

### Activity 3

**Don’t Pull My Leg:** This is an adaptation from one of Morgan and Rinvoluceri’s proposals under the heading “Call My Bluff,” but instead of using the dictionary as the starting point, we use The Guinness Book of Records. This activity consists of making a list of records, say five, with three actually taken from the book and two invented or intentionally distorted. The aim for the students is to work in groups and decide whether the records are genuine or not and justify their conclusion. The students can be restricted to current class topics.

LEVEL	Upper-Intermediate to Advanced
TIME	25–30 minutes
PREPARATION	It is important that the teacher limit the sections used according to the current level of proficiency of the students. The key to distinguishing the real from the distorted or invented records should be the recognition of essential items of vocabulary on the part of the students.
IN CLASS	The students should be arranged in different groups and, depending on the number of books at their disposal, students should be able to work with the actual material or with copies provided by the teacher. Initially, the teacher produces several lists for different groups of students. Then, in a gamelike format, the different groups of students challenge their classmates to guess whether the record being discussed is real or distorted. If it is distorted, students can be invited to check and explain the correct data in the book. Teachers should limit the time.

### Example of Don't Pull My Leg

**True or False Records:** Guess whether the following are real or distorted. If they are distorted,



find out the real information.

The greatest officially recorded number of children born to one mother is 69, by the wife of Feodor Vassilyev (b, 1707- 1882), a peasant from Shuya, 240 km 150 miles east of Moscow, Russia. In 27 confinements she gave birth to 16 pairs of twins, seven sets of triplets, and four sets of quadruplets. The case was reported to Moscow by the Monastery of Nikolskiy on February 27, 1872. Only two of these, who were born in the period c. 1725-1765, failed to survive their infancy (Matthews 1994:57).

The tallest woman in medical history was the giantess Zeng Jinlian (n.\*June 26, 1964) of Yujiang village in the Bright Moon Commune, Hunan Province, central China, who measured 148 cm when she died on February 13, 1983 (Matthews 1994:55).

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